

Article

The Bible Goes ‘Pop’: How Religion Is Deeply Mediatized Amongst Flemish Youngsters

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Abstract

While the Bible’s stories are some of the most enduring in human history, they find increasing difficulty staying relevant, especially to young people in a secular context. How do contemporary youngsters relate to Bible stories? We exposed $N = 32$ Flemish, college-aged media users, divided into four focus groups of 7–10 participants (each meeting twice for a total of eight focus group discussions), to the same Bible story in three different media forms: text, video, and videogame. In these discussions, participants related the story to their own lives in various ways (whether new or familiar to them), relating it to their contemporary cultural context in three different ways. Some ‘**Relativized**’ the story as similar to contemporary fictional media narratives. Others ‘**Perennialized**’ by assuming an underlying, universal story from which all these stories originate—whether Biblical or contemporary. Others ‘**Hierarchized**’ the Bible as originatory, or even as a repository of stories from which all Western stories take their meaning. Within its specific cultural context, our analysis of this sample contributes a situated, empirically grounded example to the literature of “deep mediatization,” suggesting that the deep mediatization of religion encourages a ‘**content-ification**’ of Biblical narratives, making them **comparable** to other media content, while also placing pressure on their particular religious, sacred and authoritative status.

Keywords: Bible; popular culture; deep mediatization; focus groups; content-ification of the Bible



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1. Introduction

καὶ ἀπέστειλεν καὶ εἰσήγαγεν αὐτόν καὶ οὗτος πυρράκης μετὰ
κάλλους ὀφθαλμῶν καὶ ἀγαθὸς ὁράσει κυρίῳ καὶ εἶπεν κύριος πρὸς
Σαμουὴλ ἀνάστα καὶ χρίσον τὸν Δαυὶδ ὅτι οὗτος ἀγαθὸς ἐστίν

The passage above, taken from the Septuagint, is no longer intelligible to most contemporary readers. Already more intelligible is the King James Version’s equivalent: “And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to. And the Lord said, Arise, anoint him: for this is he” (1Samuel 16:12 KJV). Those less fluent in (Early Modern) English are in luck: the Bible is constantly translated

into different languages on different carriers—papyrus, parchment, paper—and different media. What to think, for example, of the BBC’s David—not exactly “ruddy”—who slung a stone at a CGI wolf on TV in 2013? Or the David of *The Game Bible*, whom players navigate through puzzles and the occasional ‘glitch’ (an unintended fault in the computer game) before he can be anointed.

While the Bible’s many books and stories, including the story of David, are some of the most enduring in human history, they find increasing difficulty staying relevant. In the US, 45% of adults read the Bible less than yearly, and 34% never do. The most common complaint? “[T]he language [is] difficult to relate to” (Fulks and Plake 2020). Generally, people are becoming less religious in the West (Pew 2025; GIA 2025), especially the young and educated (Johnson 1997; Pew 2018). This is true in Belgium, too, where our research is situated, despite having a relatively slow-secularizing population compared to its neighbouring countries (WIN/GIA 2017), and despite its strong monoculturally Catholic tradition (Eurobarometer 2023, p. 173).

Regardless of (Western) secularization trends, religion paradoxically persists in the public domain in and through media. Religious stories, particularly including Biblical narratives, have become transmedial—translated to popular films, TV series, and even videogames—they have, literally, become more visible to the general public. Departing from this theoretical assumption of a “mediatization” of religion, we study how young (Flemish) people relate to the Bible—particularly the story of David—in different media forms. The study is based on four focus groups of 7–10 participants (totaling $N = 32$), with each group meeting twice (totaling eight discussions): first, they were exposed to the Biblical story of David (1Samuel 16:1–13) in textual, cinematic, and videogame form, and asked to discuss; then, they were asked to discuss these media again ten days later. Before we elaborate on this research design, below, we first set out the relevant theoretical context of the (deep) mediatization of religion.

1.1. Religion Through/in Media

Notwithstanding ‘grand’ theories about secularization, recent studies in the sociology of religion and media studies show that media play a significant role in introducing religion to young people. Religion, we argue, is *mediatized* in at least two distinct ways.

First of all, religion reaches young people *through* media—a development that leads to a transformation of religion from local churches to potentially global communities (Aupers and de Wildt 2022; Hoover 2006; Šisler et al. 2023). Stewart Hoover already showed that for Christian television in the 1980s, there was “the more general sense among the leaders of this new movement that in order to have its desired outcomes it needed to be something that took the public sphere—and particularly the media—seriously” (Hoover 2006, p. 58). More recently, Corrina Laughlin’s studies show that evangelical “start-up churches” have placed American evangelicalism at the forefront of technological innovation, enabling digital missionary work, as well as new forms of religious authority and discourse (Laughlin 2021a, 2021b). The re-mediation of the Bible itself plays a core role in such technological innovation toward what Dyer calls the “people of the screen” (Dyer 2023), who read Biblical narratives in all sorts of forms beyond the paper book. More broadly, H. A. Campbell (2010) argued that, rather than rejecting new media, Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities use digital media to globally spread and re-shape religious traditions, resulting in prayer apps, digitized religious texts (incorporations of old practices in new technologies), and televangelism (which actively makes use of the internet to appropriate and spread faith) (e.g., Campbell and Vitullo 2016). Mia Lövheim adds in a study on young Swedes’ religious identity that the internet provides them with “experiences that enrich young people in their efforts to create their own religious identity”

(cf. Droogers 2014; Lövheim 2004, p. 70). Johan Roeland and co-authors even show that such digital religious identity-formation can lead young people—such as Salafists and New Agers—to seek a more “purified” version of their religion (Roeland et al. 2010); new media influencers and “religious digital creatives” (H. A. Campbell 2020)—particularly in North America and Europe—are successfully and popularly navigating religious authenticity, religious authority, and direct address of young audiences (ibid.; Cooper 2022).

Secondly, religion plays a role *in* media. Literature, film, games, and other cultural industries use religion for entertainment and inspiration, or religion is ‘found’ in them through consumers’ appropriation of meaning in media. Religious narratives, symbols and rituals play a significant role in (secular) contemporary media texts from *Stranger Things* (Byers and Powell 2024), to best-selling videogames such as *Assassin’s Creed* (Bosman 2019; de Wildt 2019, 2023). Lynn Schofield Clark, already in the early 2000s, documented a shift toward how teens deal with mediatized religion in fiction rather than in religious institutions (Clark 2005). She found that teens’ engagement with series like *Angel*, *Buffy* or *The X-Files* sometimes led them to reconsider their religious stance against (or sometimes back in line with) organized religion (ibid.).

Digital media such as videogames, especially, show consumers increasingly active ways of engaging with religious identities and practices (de Wildt 2025; de Wildt and Aupers 2021). According to Rachel Wagner, videogames offer an escape from the “vicissitudes of contemporary life” in which “practitioners give themselves over to a predetermined set of rules that shape a world view and offer a system of order and structure that is comforting for its very predictability” (Wagner 2012, p. 193). Interviews with players and developers show that games and social media encourage discussion of and experimentation with religious identity (de Wildt and Aupers 2019, 2020, 2023), and some consumers go so far as to construct “invented” or “fiction-based religions” such as Jediism, Matrixism or Tolkien-based religions (Cusack 2010; Davidsen 2013; Possamai 2005), with beliefs and practices based on media.

1.2. Deep Mediatization of Religion?

The spread of religion through media and its prominence in popular media texts, are indicative of what Hjarvard has called a “mediatization of religion” (Hjarvard 2016, p. 8), referring to the processes “through which religious beliefs, agency, and symbols are becoming influenced by the workings of various media,” rather than the other way around (ibid.; cf. Kołodziejska et al. 2023). Media scholars such as Deuze (2011), Couldry and Hepp (2018), argue that this is largely true for all societal domains. The argument for such “deep mediatization” is that society is not only *mediatized*—a process in which “technological communication media saturate more and more social domains” (Hepp 2019, p. 3)—but that we are experiencing “an advanced stage of the process [of mediatization] in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures” (ibid., p. 5). What this means, in the words of Deuze, who professes a similar theory, is that we now live our “lives as lived *in*, rather than *with*, media” (Deuze 2011, p. 137).

Media, from this perspective, was traditionally a “semi-independent institution” (Hjarvard 2016, p. 9), influencing different areas of society by representing and reporting on them. Nowadays, however, it is impossible to imagine social life outside media, political events such as elections unfiltered and undecided through media, or even global finance “without a visual, computer-based representation of the processed data” (Hepp 2019, p. 10). Even children’s main forms of primary socialization—family time, play, and education—are similarly deeply mediatized:

First, the child increasingly depends from her early awareness on a media infrastructure, in order to be present to and with her parents. Such basic forms of initial socialization once did not involve media, but now increasingly they do [...] Second, media infrastructure is intrinsic to the space of play: it is a mediated space–time (of games, database searching, talking, seeing photos, playing with images) into which the child reaches when she reaches out to play, whether with or without her parents. (Couldry and Hepp 2018, p. 150)

The literature on the intertwinement of media and religion suggests that young people are, on an individual level and culturally as groups, presented with religious content that is deeply mediatized. After all, whether they are presented with religion *through* or *in* media, media are increasingly part of how they know religion in the first place.

This deep mediatization of religion—in which the knowledge, experience, and imagination of religion strongly depend on media—is the point of departure of this study. Young adolescents are “digital natives” (Prensky 2001): more than older generations, they use a varied repertoire of traditional, digital and interactive media within a broad media ecology. Such media repertoires and how they impinge on religion should be studied in a local context since, according to Hjarvard, “mediatization may be considered a general process of modernity [but how] this process is actually spelled out, the particular interactions between media developments and social developments, are variable and dependent on historical, geographical, and institutional context” (Hjarvard 2016, pp. 9–10).

In the local context of (formerly) Catholic Flanders and its media ecology—of which the Bible once was a fundamental part—we therefore ask how Flemish young people relate to the (deep) mediatization of religion. More specifically, we focus in this respect on the Biblical story of David in three media forms—written text, cinema and videogame. The main question is as follows: How do they relate to the Bible in these different media forms? And, more generally, how does this mediatization shape their perception, image and perspective on Christian religion?

2. Methodology

To address this question, we opted for a research design in which groups of participants were first exposed to three media products, based on the same Bible verses in text, film and videogame form, respectively. After this, we conducted two focus groups discussion with each group: one focus group discussion straight after media exposure, and another focus group discussion ten days later, to find out what they recalled of each medium and whether they had thought about the content. Below, we will briefly introduce the media material, method and the resulting data in more detail.

2.1. Materials

We used existing media products for our research design, which necessarily narrowed our choice of Bible verses. Nonetheless, the gathered materials were all based on the Bible chapter 1Samuel 16. In order to minimize bias based on the order in which the media were presented to participants, two groups were exposed to the text first, video second and game last; the other two groups got the reverse order.

The text fragment was from a modern Dutch translation (the NBV [New Bible Translation] from 2004). In it, the prophet Samuel is sent by God to anoint the new king of Israel from among the sons of Jesse, a farmer near Bethlehem. Seven of Jesse’s eight sons are presented to Samuel, but God chooses none of them. David, the eighth and youngest son, is out herding sheep, but when he is sent for, it turns out that David—rather than his taller, older, more handsome brothers—is God’s chosen one, and Samuel anoints him. Students read verses 1–13, ending with David’s anointment and receiving of God’s spirit.

The video fragment was an excerpt from BBC's live-action *The Bible* miniseries, specifically from 6:40 to 8:00 of Episode 4,¹ originally aired on 10 March 2013. The clip loosely depicts lines 1, 11, 12 and 13, adapted for television in several ways. In it, a voice-over by Keith David (narrating "after Saul's disobedience, God commands his prophet Samuel to find the new king") accompanies a shot of David (played by Jassa Aluwalia) tending to his sheep. Samuel (Paul Freeman) arrives as David protects his sheep from a wolf (added in post-production) using a sling and stone. After confirming his name to Samuel (and the viewer), David is anointed in the field "to be the next King of Israel," as the song *Faith* by Hans Zimmer and Lorne Balfe plays.

The videogame fragment was a part of *The Game Bible Series: David, Rise of A King*, an uncompleted project by the "Tornado Twins" from 2014. Its downloadable demo covers 1Samuel 16:1–13,² with players controlling David as he finds his way home past some minor jumping and other puzzles, ending when David walks past his brothers—who stand up in reverence—for him to be anointed. The game displays the Bible verse corresponding to the action on-screen, and has character voices in Aramaic with English subtitles. It contains some minor bugs and is relatively lengthy, which is why we chose to show a video of the opening 'lines' and then positioned players just before verse 12, asking them to enter the city, find their way to David's family and the prophet, and be anointed. Most players were able to complete this within the 10 min given to them.

2.2. Method

These media materials were shown in a controlled setting to volunteering students selected on the basis of two criteria: they had to be Dutch-speaking students taking part in the obligatory course on "Religion, meaning-making and philosophy" at KU Leuven that year—which all students do, across all faculties.

The exposure was conducted on two dates for each group: the initial four dates for media exposure, followed by a first focus group discussion; and a second focus group discussion ten days later. On the first day, groups were informed about the experiment and asked for informed consent by signing the relevant forms. They were then given very minimal context about the Bible story they would be exposed to: that in 1Samuel 16, there is a character called David who is anointed, which is a ritual in which oil is poured out of a horn, first used to mark sheep and later to grant God's power to fulfil a task.

Participants were seated at equally spaced computers and were simultaneously given 10 min to read, watch or play the media materials in the same order, each time after which they filled in a short "transportation scale" (Green and Brock 2000), to invite them to reflect on how involved they were with each medium. The first focus group discussion commenced straight after, with two researchers guiding the conversation around questions of medium-specificity, preference, about the story itself, about what it reminded them of, and whether they recognized any cultural, religious, or philosophical meaning in it. A projection screen was available with the three media materials, in case the group decided to reflect back on the media (in which case the videogame was replaced by the first author's recorded play-through). Ten days later, the group came together again to discuss whether they had thought of the media, the story, or the Bible in the meantime; what they could remember of them; and what they found important about the discussion itself afterward. The complete research design was reviewed and approved by KU Leuven's ethics committee under approval number G-2018091337.

In both cases, focus groups were used not just to gather individual insights on how people made sense of the media materials and what they agreed on, but also what they disagreed on, leading to sharpened and more articulated positions uniting and just as often dividing the group (Parker and Tritter 2006). The conversations were recorded,

transcribed, then open-coded by the first three authors according to a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). We transitioned from open coding to iteratively more focused themes through a process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2023), using *Atlas.TI* to coordinate the shared process of coding in three steps, after each of which we met with all authors to evaluate and inform further analysis, by first engaging in a collective process of “axial coding, i.e., the process of relating subcategories to a category” (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 114), and eventually the emergence of “themes,” i.e., of “cluster[s] of linked categories conveying similar meanings” (Mogashoa 2014, p. 109; cf. Laba 2026). Thus, rather than summarizing our data or categorizing them into a pre-determined theoretical conceptualization (Aupers et al. 2018), we arrived collectively and reflexively at a code book of 3 closed codes with a total of 13 subcodes, which resulted in the analysis below.

2.3. Data and Limitations

A total of $N = 32$ students participated, divided in four groups consisting of 7, 7, 10 and 8 students, each coming back for a second focus group discussion as planned. Although we did not select for gender, within each group there were 1, 3, 2 and 2 participants who identified as male, and 0 who identified as non-binary, with the majority identifying as female. All eight focus group discussions lasted 1.5 h, and each student filled in 3 transportation scale forms (after each media exposure). Students were aged 19–23 and studied Accounting (1), Biochemistry (1), Communication sciences (13), History (1), Information Technology (1), Political sciences (2), Psychology (1), Law (1), Nursing (2), Physiotherapy (4), Linguistics (1), Philosophy (1), and Theology (3).

More importantly, this dataset includes only a limited diversity of participants. We will stress here, and again in our discussion section, that this is an otherwise specific and relatively uniform body of participants: all were students at a Flemish institute for higher education, many had grown up speaking Dutch as their first language, and the focus groups were conducted in this setting: in Flanders, in Dutch, and within the secularizing post-Catholic context of Belgium as noticed above. We want to explicitly acknowledge this context-specific character of our sample and methodology to stress that we do not aim to generalize our findings to all young people nor all forms of mediatized religion, but we do aim for the specificity of this context to provide empirical depth and clarity to wider empirical and theoretical debates.

More practically, in order to anonymize our participants while keeping some minimal distinction between their individual voices, we represent their citations below in a single formula. First, whether they identified with a gender (M/F/etc.); second, which group they were in; and thirdly, which discussion (the initial experiment and discussion or the 10-day follow-up): e.g., when Sofie from the third group spoke in the second discussion, her quote is labelled F3.2. When another woman is quoted after Sofie in the first paragraph, her quote is labelled with an asterisk, in this case *F3.2, with an additional asterisk for every other woman quoted in the same paragraph from that same group discussion, to retain the relevant context.

As a final methodological note, given the sensitivity of the topic to some readers of various backgrounds, we would like to emphasize that we regard it as our task to represent participants' views and interpretations without judgement. We reserve full etic distance to the emic views cited below: these are situated discourses, indicative of broader cultural sentiments, which we seek to articulate at a critical distance.

3. Relating the Bible to Popular Media Ecologies

Across all four focus groups, there was a clear and somewhat unexpected pattern of relating the story of David to contemporary ‘texts’ from film, television, literature and other media. Having read the story of 1Samuel 16:1–13, as well as seeing it as a video, and playing it in the form of a videogame (as described above), students were not primarily comparing the differences between media forms, but comparing the content of the Biblical stories to stories they knew from popular media culture:

F1.1: “This reminds me a lot of Cinderella”

*F1.1: “Oh yeah, me too! Ah right, but then it is about the ugly stepsisters”

M1.1: “Yes but they *think* they are beautiful”

F1.1: “I think a lot of stories have this, that underdog character”

Another group, also arriving at the trope of the underdog protagonist, continues, and draws from a variety of sources including reality TV, personal experience and books:

M4.1: I think that’s a theme used throughout human history, which talks to everyone’s imagination kind of? Just the person who doesn’t seem ‘it’ at first and then becomes ‘it.’

F4.1: Susan Boyle for example! The one from *Britain’s Got Talent*.

*F4.1: Or like ginger people being bullied, or small or plump kids being excluded, but then eventually—

*M4.1: I think this is something that recurs in so many movies and series

—Interviewer: Do you have any other examples?

**M4.1: *Harry Potter*!

Across groups, common examples of stories similar to 1Samuel 16 were indeed *Harry Potter* (a neglected child made to live in a staircase cupboard turns out to be a powerful wizard), *Cinderella* (a girl delegated to clean while her sisters dress up to court a prince, whom Cinderella ends up marrying), the *Lord of the Rings* (a small, simple Hobbit brings peace to Middle Earth among much more powerful magical creatures, races and characters), *The Beauty and the Beast*, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, *The Lion King*, *Dumbo*, *La Vita è Bella*, *Spiderman*, *Star Wars*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Step Up*, *High School Musical*, fairy tales, soap operas, songs (including those of *Clouseau* and *Tupac*), life stories in magazines, and so on endlessly.

This way of making sense of Biblical stories revealed several ways of relating to a text that was often found to be “stuffy” with “negative associations” (F2.1), “boring” (M2.2, F3.2), “outdated” (F4.1), or even “annoying” and “easily given up on” (*F2.1). Despite this, and across these different ways of relating to the text on David, all of them were comparative: the Biblical text was only meaningful to students in relation to their own cultures, their knowledge of historical contexts, and their contemporary media ecologies. Below, we distinguish between three distinctive ways of relating to the Bible via contemporary fiction, namely: Relativizing the Bible as equally meaningless and fictional as similar stories; Perennializing all these stories (including the Biblical one) as somehow archetypal and revealing for a universal underlying truth; and Hierarchizing the Bible as having more authority, or even being originatory for similar stories.

3.1. Relativization: “Just Another Story”

For some of the participants, the co-occurrence of David’s narrative in 1Samuel 16 with similar stories in pop culture made all these narratives across the board equally

unimpressive. An example arose in a discussion of whether you could get anything uniquely out of the story of David:

If you want to read that story, that underdog story [of David], then you don't have to necessarily go read the Bible. Because you can just watch 1000 other films or books and get the same morals. *Are you really going to read the Bible for that stuff?* (F4.1)

Students like her compared the Bible story with other popular stories in a way that reduces it to "just another story" (F1.1): a fictional story like all the rest on offer. By reducing Bible stories to just another story where "you can just watch 1000 other films or books and get the same" (F4.1), the ultimate meaning, authority and sacrality of the Bible (as it is in many Christians' eyes) is relativized. Such relativizations divorce the Biblical story from its related tradition of worship. "Come to think of it," one Christian participant said, "because I see this more like just another story, I don't really connect my faith to this" (*F1.1).

The relativized Bible story is furthermore judged by its aesthetics as a text, rather than in the context of its tradition of worship:

I can find more meaning in a beautiful poem than in a badly written, moralizing Biblical text [. . .] I get more things from stories about people or things that I read, stories of real people's lives: that's going to stay with me much more, and allows me to get things out of it that are important to me. Not from the Bible. (F3.1)

Others added that "because we're not really from a religious family, it's more an entertaining story than anything else" (F1.1), that "from a story or even a film like that I'm not going to get much of a message" (M2.1), and that "the Bible is worth less now because you can find similar stuff in popular culture. Of course, back in the day they did not have all those good films, and stories like these were all they had" (F4.1), with another concluding that "there are just way more stories and distractions on offer now" (*F4.1).

Finally, the Bible was often dismissed for media-specific reasons. Specifically, the film version "looked fake" and "underwhelming" because of some apparently dated CGI (F2.1); whereas the game version featured a player-controlled David figure that "did not seem to me like a king of Israel" (F3.1), and who "in another costume would be just like controlling Mario" (M3.1). The text itself was not immune to such media-specific criticisms, either:

Yeah, I have that feeling less with Biblical texts, but also because I think belief is something you have to fill in yourself. So I feel that the Bible isn't holy. That sounds very atheist even, but I feel like the Word [of God] itself is not necessarily sacred, so yeah, I find that personally difficult to see it as such. (*F2.1)

In this way, the Bible was finally relativized by such participants as just another text because it was treated *as* just a text, rather than the word of God. In the end, in competition with all the other trivial distractions of contemporary media ecologies, what is more entertaining wins:

I would for example rather watch an hour of *Rick & Morty* episodes than to sit down and read the Bible for an hour. (M4.2)

3.2. Perennialization: "Those Stories Hold Humanity's Values"

Other participants, however, stressed that not despite, but *because* these narrative structures were apparent everywhere, they were all speaking to some underlying truth. Other texts and media were seen as equally valuable in communicating the same truths:

F2.2: Yeah, so, I think in *Beauty & the Beast* or *the Hunchback of Notre Dame*, all those typical Disney stories, that that is close to the same story. I think I know

those same values more from Disney than that I have the idea that they come from the Bible.

M2.2 [nodding]: Those kinds of values that are kind of ingrained in society and are expressed in a lot of different ways because of that

*F2.2: Yes! There are so many stories like that, which I can immediately think of. It is almost a bit of a cliché to write a story like that [—like the story of 1Samuel 16].

These “cliché” values, such as that the underdog may finally be recognized for their pure heart, greatness or other inherent virtues, are spread across media. Such media included, as elaborately mentioned at the start of our analysis, the Bible, contemporary texts—including a recurring list of Disney films—as well as texts older than the Bible. Such values were suggested to be “more universal than necessarily religious” (M2.1), or “important universal values, which I think, they could just as well be in a romantic film or on [Flemish day-time television]” (*F2.2).

Students of this group, who emphasized the universal values and narratives as ‘underlying’ both Biblical and pop-cultural texts (rather than originating in any one of them), frequently also mentioned sources predating the story of David in the Book of Samuel. “I see sort of the same as what we learn from a lot of Greek and Roman stories” which are “part of history, at the same level of Christian stories” (M2.1); or “for example, the same as in Greek and Roman stories because we learn the same thing from them, it is also just a part of history; with all the myths and stories that come to us from that” (*M2.1). Biblical stories thus become just one particular historical instant in which a value is expressed. Sharing her thoughts on this, one student suggested to the group that

I don’t think that those values would be lost would the Bible be left behind. It is a way of communicating values, but when it is no longer relevant, like, come on, it is still important now, but I can imagine that in a century, that other ways of communicating those values become more important [. . .] It is interesting that those stories hold humanity’s values? Those values and meanings will also keep existing outside of the Bible. (F2.1)

More importantly, then, even after specific stories (sacred or otherwise) fall out of fashion, these ideas are, according to another participant, “just a way to express universal values, like if you’d compare the Quran and the Bible they’re mostly alike, you’d find the same things but just in different ways” (*M2.1).

This idea, that there are universal ideas and values that are expressed across cultures, times, and religions, can be called “perennialism.” Popularized by Aldous Huxley, the “perennial philosophy” holds that a common underlying truth or mystery lies underneath the world’s different religious and cultural beliefs (Huxley 1945). As historian of religion Wouter Hanegraaff argues, a seminal figure of Western esotericism (Edgar Cayce) became popular through stories of the past lives of his patients, on the basis of whose accounts “Cayce describes a tradition of ‘perennial wisdom’ that is passed on from Atlantis to Egypt, and from Egypt to the ‘great initiate’ Jesus” (Hanegraaff 1996, p. 309). Such a disparate connection of universally sacred knowledge from mainstream religious, historical and popular-cultural sources alike is quintessentially perennial (Faivre and Needleman 1993; Hammer 2001; Hanegraaff 1996; Partridge 2004). Students expressed this perennialist attitude in general when they said that “I knew that value and story, but I had never associated it with: that must be in the Bible” (F2.2), or call it “more a general value” (*F2.2); and they are explicitly perennialist when stating that

it is just a standard value you see everywhere in culture, right? Which you learn at home. Maybe this is a cheesy example, but it is even in that song by

Clouseau [several others start enthusiastically shouting] that beauty is inside of you [Clouseau—*Van Binnen*].” (**F2.2)

Modern media appear expertly fit for endless variations on these perennial narratives. Some examples, already mentioned above, came up again and again:

I had to think a lot about *the Beauty and the Beast* and stuff like that. Those stories are old, but their message can be told in so many ways. Just like [Jacob] said as well: super hero movies show us the same thing—like Spider-Man. [...] I do really think that the Bible is more just a way of presenting that message in one way, while basically nowadays we are doing the same via films and superheroes and via *Beauty and the Beast*. (M2.2)

3.3. Hierarchization: “The Power of the Bible”

Finally, a group of participants ascribed some fundamental position of authority of the David story above all other similar stories. Without necessarily being Christians, these participants hierarchized the David story above other stories, as being originatory to the other stories; as having a special historical and cultural status; having a legitimized form and interpretation; and being associated with the authority of the Church.

Often, the originatory status of the Bible was hesitantly raised after the perennial argument was made by others:

F2.2: “Something I’m thinking of the whole time is: were those children’s stories there first or was the Bible first and what’s based on what?”

*F2.2: “Yeah, I was thinking the same [others voice agreement]”

**F2.2: “Were those values already there and was the Bible based on those values, and are those children’s stories based on the Bible in turn? Or were those values just there and then both the Bible and the other stories were directly based on those? Or did the Bible create those values?”

Yes, the argument goes, Disney films and romantic comedies share narratives with Biblical stories, but the Bible is the original source of these stories. As one student said, “maybe it goes back to the basis, where it begins, all those moral stories” (F4.1), with another interjecting that “right, it is a repository of the basic stories: you can watch an underdog-film but the Bible already has that and more [...] which you can see in other films” (M4.1). Another added that the Bible, as a repository of stories, “is a handy overview, knowing that there is *one* work where you can find everything” (*M4.1). One student admitted being confused by the whole conversation, saying

those values. . . Do they come from our culture, how we were raised, our faith, Biblical texts, videogames? We don’t really know anymore, we go ‘ah it comes from fairy tales,’ ‘ah it comes from Disney,’ ‘ah it comes from *Up*,’ ‘ah wait no it comes from. . .’ After a while we don’t know anymore, which I think illustrates somehow that Bible stories are the common denominator. (M3.2)

One reason that such students saw the Bible as “above” (M3.1), “more important” (M4.1), or a “common denominator of” (M3.2) other texts was because of its historical authenticity as part of a long-lasting cultural tradition. Or, put colloquially, “you know, like, it’s from the Bible, it’s *so old*. If you just took a text with similar content, you would look at it differently because it isn’t from the year whatever and with so many people basing their beliefs on it” (F3.2). This means that the Bible is held to a higher standard, because “if we had just taken a text from a book or something, we would look at it far less critically than if it were a fragment from the Bible, in my opinion” (F3.1). In that same interaction, the previous student concluded that “I still think that Bible texts have a bit of extra value,

because it is so authentic" (*F3.1). What makes it authentic? Another student chimed in to add that

when you hear it is from the Bible you immediately think 'ah right, okay, the Bible was written so many years ago and has been evolved by so many writers throughout the years,' it gets a religious weight to it [...] it becomes a holy thing, something you cannot really meddle with. It just is like that. I find it very difficult to put into words, but it has this special position I think. (*F3.2)

In the quotes above, explaining precisely *why* the Bible has an "authenticity" (F3.1), or "special position" (F3.2) over other texts is difficult.

However, one recurring reason for the Bible's special status for our participants was their consideration of it as a "basis" (e.g., F4.1) for Flemish, Belgian, or even Western culture. When talking about its historical authenticity, words like "our culture" (M3.2) or "we" (e.g., M2.1; M3.1; F3.1) already came up above, as they did among white Belgian students, students of colour, atheists, Christians, and those of other (Semitic) faiths alike. As one Muslim student specified, "The Bible has for a very long time, culturally speaking been the most important work, it has influenced our society for a long time and I think that that is just part of our history, to say it like that" (F4.1). Another student, concurring, thinks "that everyone here more or less has the same values and norms [...] I think that whether or not we got those directly from Bible stories, those values and norms from our upbringing and education do eventually come from the Bible" (M4.1). A third added that "you don't have to read the Bible but you do get its norms and values in some way or another. And I mean, the norms we share don't exactly come from a movie my mother saw yesterday" (*M4.1).

By contrast, a plethora of "other" cultures allegedly holding other norms were used as counterexamples to show that Biblical values were foundational for Western culture. While some of these examples seemed Orientalist to us, we include them here for the sake of representing the students' argument. One student added that

even values such as 'beauty is on the inside,' things *we* find very normal. . . If we look geographically far enough away, or back in time we see that even those most basic values are totally different elsewhere. 'Real beauty is on the inside'? A Byzantine emperor lost his position after his nose was chopped off as he was deemed unable to rule because he no longer looked perfect! (M3.1)

Other students offered anecdotes of a "Chinese friend who fell off his bike" who was surprised at bystanders' stopping to help, as apparent proof of "not a universal value [but specifically] of the Bible teaching *us* helpfulness" (*M3.1, emphasis added); and that "certain African tribes do not share our ideas of equality and respect" (M3.1); or that "it is similar for example to how the Greek and Roman gods were a part of their history, myths and stories—I think that is on the same level as Christian stories [...] Christianity is just a part of Belgian history" (M3.2).

Other students who saw the Bible as essentially different, protected the traditional *form* of the Bible above other media, in addition to its content. To them, even the physical book itself was "special": when asked whether we could just put the Bible online for everyone to read [NB: it already is available online], a student shouted out "No, we can't do that! That is our culture, that is our history!" (F1.2). Others pointed out that the Bible is special for its specific use of "antiquated language" without which "it would lose a part of its charm" (F1.1), in its "original form which has a lot more value for me" (M1.1), and was attributed "authentic value, also because it is a historical source and the historical source of our values" (*F1.2). Getting rid of especially the "original Latin text is unthinkable: that is *history* [...] it would be like demolishing and replacing the Colosseum" (**F1.2). The

same goes for its traditional textual format over other media, stating, for instance, that “the text is of irreplaceable value, whereas a movie, *allez*, the text is the mainstay whereas the film and game are only supporting the text as interpretations of it” (F3.2). In particular some students found the Bible too special for a videogame, with one noting mildly that “that was totally unexpected, an association you don’t make: gaming and the Bible, or those stories” (F2.2) and another more pointedly saying “I found it bizarre for a religious story to be in a game, that is something old and totally different from modern things like computers” (F2.1).

What came up throughout all such discussions was that the perceived higher status of the Bible demanded a more didactic reading style than other stories and media. It was regarded as a form of “high culture” as opposed to “low” media culture, to be read as more complex and symbolic. As one participant pointed out, “these are stories to teach norms and values, *voilà*. You can watch films, but I would not personally expect a takeaway then” (F1.2). Knowing that you

will be consuming a Bible text is different, because I know the point is no longer just about the story, but it is now about the underlying meaning. Another text I would just read for the story, but if I know it is from the Bible I will read more between the lines. (M3.2)

Those interpretations, many felt, were not up to them: Biblical stories’ authoritative status raises the expectation that there is a set, authorized interpretation, giving “the feeling that a way of thinking is imposed on me instead of being able to think for myself about it” (F2.1). With other stories “there is always still freedom to believe or think whatever you want” (*F1.2), but “a Bible story, that is more difficult” (M2.1), and “if I see a Bible story I often think ‘oh I won’t be able to understand that’ [...] it’s just heavier to even begin to read than a normal story” (*F2.1). By contrast, “in church or school, when you hear the story, it is forced upon you, you have to sit down and listen and there is no option to engage in dialogue” (*M2.1).

Such associations with the authority of the priest, Church, and God were a final, distinct reason for many to consider the Bible as “above” other texts. Even though “a Bible and the Church are actually two separate things. . . It is difficult to disconnect the two” (F1.2). That “church sort of imposes on everyone their interpretations and they decide based on those that women can’t be priests and stuff, I can’t deal with that very well” (*F1.2). One student explained that they

think that the power of the Bible is definitely everything that was built around it, with the church and everyone, the preachers and stuff. If you watch a movie in the cinema then you just watch it and leave home afterwards. But if you go to church, you get a whole interpretation along with the Mass you’re attending that day. So you get told not just the story itself but everything that could be important about it. (F4.1)

In many ways, as one student stressed, the reason “the Bible isn’t seen as just a book” is that “it was literally seen as the Word of God. So, everything in the Bible we had to research [...] the Bible was the only communication with God, so it had to be analysed” (M4.1). Whether it is the word of God or of just a priest, for these students, the way that the Bible has been treated and taught gives it, along with its cultural status and historical form, a place of importance above other texts.

4. Discussion: A Deep Mediatization of the Bible

In the above analysis, we have given an overview of the different ways in which students relate to Bible stories. This was done on the basis of four different focus groups

holding two discussions each, for a total of eight discussions by a total of $N = 32$ students, who were exposed to the story of 1Samuel 16 in three forms: a modern Biblical text, a video clip and a videogame.

One thing our research suggests, is that “deep mediatization”—a process through which institutions, social networks and individual people come to depend on media—indeed seems to shape the way young people understand religion. In addition to studies demonstrating how religion is nowadays visible *in* and spread *through* media (e.g., [Aupers and de Wildt 2022](#); [H. A. Campbell 2020](#); [Cooper 2022](#)), our analysis suggests that mass media form and content in turn inform young people’s reception of religious texts. Our sample of Flemish students in a predominantly post-Catholic context is, of course, small and non-representative, which hinders attempts at theoretical generalization. However, it provides an empirically specific and theoretically instructive case-study to further study the empirical groundedness and feasibility of “deep mediatization” ([Hepp 2019](#); [Deuze 2011](#); [Hjarvard 2016](#)).

Notwithstanding the non-representative scope of our sample, *all respondents* in our focus groups spontaneously made constant comparisons between the Biblical story of David and similar narratives in popular media culture. At first sight, we may conclude that this is a form of self-conscious, reflexive *intertextuality* in which respondents select other media texts to attain a deeper understanding of the Bible and its meaning. The fact that participants rarely interpreted the story without reference to popular media narratives suggests a strong degree of “deep mediatization” in which it becomes difficult to even think, reflect, or speak about this Biblical story of David *outside* of media. Indeed, this media-centred habitus informed their comparative interpretation of the Biblical content—comparing it to the contents of Disney films, fantasy movies, soap operas, song lyrics, and so on—in which competing (childhood) memories of other media proved key to their interpretations. To be clear, our use of theories on “deep mediatization” here is not deterministic, but as a constructivist way to make sense of our observations: our participants might bring up different media-repertoires on the basis of individual preference but, collectively, they framed a Biblical narrative within the shared context of their wider media consumption, suggesting both the successful socializing workings of media more broadly and the internalization of its content (cf. [Berger and Luckmann 1966](#)).

On the level of evaluation and appreciation of the media texts, we distinguished three ideal-typical positions our participants took toward relating the Biblical story to contemporary media texts. **First**, the position of ‘**Relativizing**’ implies a typically postmodern form of trivialization in which Biblical texts are “just another story” among countless other stories and (mass-mediated) texts that are historically-culturally produced. Bereft of any reference to a higher Truth or supernatural order, the Bible is in this perspective reduced to fiction competing with other fictitious stories and mythologies. From a postmodern stance, the Bible has become one out of countless “language games” ([Lyotard \[1979\] 1984](#)), “vocabularies” ([Rorty 1998](#)), or even a self-referential “hyperreality” with “no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum” ([Baudrillard \[1981\] 1994](#), p. 6). If we evaluate such emic evaluations of young people, we may lament the lack of reference and, hence, the “meaninglessness” of this relativist position. Remaining references are intertextual and not in reference to a truth ‘out there.’ Whereas Baudrillard famously criticized this “liquidation of all referentials,” including the “divine referential” (*ibid.*); authors like [Jameson \(1991\)](#) point out in a similar vein that the “logic of late-capitalism” and the proliferation of media texts destroy long-established distinctions between high art and popular culture; the sacred and the profane and, ultimately, the meaning these distinctions engender.

And yet, in the other two positions, our respondents do actively construct a deeper meaning in their comparison of the Bible with (other) media texts. This meaning, however, is in both cases rather cultural than religious. In the **second, ‘Perennializing’** position, the argument was put forth that the Biblical texts, Roman myths and contemporary mass-media texts actually refer to the same universal, underlying values and have therefore a significant meaning. The language and vocabularies of these texts may be different, the hierarchy between holy Christian scriptures and profane media texts may be flattened, but, in opposition to the postmodern view, respondents point out a “higher” truth underneath such confusing language games, and speak of the universal meaning that such normative narratives have for humans and humanity. “The perennial Philosophy,” Aldous Huxley writes, “is primarily concerned with the one, divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds” (Huxley 1945, p. 3). In our analysis, this perennial philosophy has taken on a more secular form: from different religious “texts” referring to “one, divine reality” to a universal, perennial, archetypical cultural value that is a constant in different stories and myths which people have told each other throughout the ages (e.g., J. Campbell [1949] 2008; Jung [1968] 2014).

Third, finally, in the case of ‘**Hierarchization**,’ the comparative perspective led to a culturally specific positioning of the text, in which the Bible does emerge as the more important or even originatory text *for* Belgian or Western culture specifically. This special authoritative status is also not grounded in religious argumentations but in cultural considerations, varying from stressing the Bible’s historical authenticity, its historical-cultural importance, or associations with the cultural authority of the priest, Church and God. The arguments of Hierarchizers attribute Biblical stories more status and authority over other stories, and even privilege their textual form over other media—in some cases even as traditionally the word of God.

Taken together, the three identified positions (Relativizing, Perennializing, and Hierarchizing), do more than just resonate with—and in many cases further fortify—existing theories (Baudrillard [1981] 1994; Huxley 1945) and recent findings on the role of media in contemporary cultural considerations of religion (H. A. Campbell 2020; Cooper 2022; Dyer 2023; Laughlin 2021b) and the mediatization of life more generally (Couldry and Hepp 2018; Deuze 2011; Kołodziejska et al. 2023).

These three identified positions more broadly should be conceptualized as three ideal-typical positions that altogether point to a mediatization of religious heritage that makes religion both (1) **content-ified** and (2) **comparable**. As we started this article, we stressed that the newness was never in the mediatization of the Bible—the Bible has always been media.

Rather, the Bible—in whichever form, and for these participants—has become *content*. What we contribute here, first of all, is empirical detail in the context of our participants’ lives’ saturation by media: we are not talking about the niche evangelical, missionary, institutionalized application of media technologies to existing religious thought; but about the fundamentally mediatized context in which all religious heritage, belief and status become ‘content,’ competing for attention with *all* other cultural content.

The Bible—in whichever form, and for these participants—has therefore become comparable. What we contribute here, secondly, is empirical detail into how such ‘content-ified’ Biblical content is then compared to other cultural content. To be clear, we are not arguing that this is necessarily a moral problem to solve, with regard to religion’s position in society: many groups seem to get similar kinds of meanings, moral values and ideological narratives from popular culture as they would from religious narratives—and often without the baggage they associate with it. We want to suggest that this only strengthens existing

calls for further empirical research to more expansively study how religious meaning-making might be in various contexts integrated into broader media cultures.

Nonetheless, within the limitations of our research and for our participants, the “mediatization of religion” that we have empirically analyzed above, may make Christian narratives and values more visible and accessible. At the same time, it may risk undermining their particular—or even sacred—status. In the three ideal-typical positions we have identified, we see that the Bible goes ‘pop.’ For Relativists, this means that the Bible’s traditional status pops, like a punctured balloon. For Perennializers, it means that the universal value of the Bible is simply integrated with the contemporary landscape of pop culture. For Hierarchizers, the Bible remains above all: the King of Pop.

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Notes

- ¹ See <https://web.archive.org/web/20200614152529/>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QopPZfUKaOY>, accessed on 28 June 2026.
- ² See <https://web.archive.org/web/20210617060044/>, <https://www.family.works/TheGameBible.php>, accessed on 28 June 2026.

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